

ENG 241 / Hill

Hero Myths and Epics – Heroes Are Us

Hero myths were recited to:

- stir the warriors' spirits
- boost morale before battle
- praise ancestral warriors
- assure long and glorious fame
- model ideal heroic behavior

The Fulani of the Sudan – nobleman set out with singer/shield bearer who was the witness and recorder of deeds. These men were protected on the battlefield as a matter of honor. If the shield bearer's nobleman was killed, the role of the shield bearer was to go back and tell the story of the battle. Therefore, the enemy would not kill the shield bearer, because he would want others to know of his great feats in battle. This reveals to us the importance of the storyteller in ancient cultures, and in the value of the hero's tale.

Aristocratic Warriors came from illustrious family lines in which there was a successive chain of heroes. The stories of their heroic deeds were told as entertainment, but also as a testament of the family's warrior history. If there was a weak link in the chain, a less skilled warrior who did not succeed, the chain would be broken and the stories would cease to be told. This reveals the importance of strong family warriors who would be heroes – to assure the continuance/fertility of the family name.

Who is the Hero?

"Heroes are us" – they are human, and are meant to be so that we as humans can see them as role models, as some level of behavior and being that we could achieve. They are also often grandiose, a bit larger than life at times – yet with a weakness, usually related to pride. A good hero will learn the humility to accept this weakness, which then becomes instructive as its own strength.

Heroes teach appropriate attitude, behavior, and values of the culture they represent. This is important to understand when reading hero tales from other cultures, since they may have values which differ from your own. It is essential that you understand and respect the values under which cultural heroes act to appreciate their virtuosity.

These are some common archetypal traits of the hero:

- Born of illegitimate union mortal / god
- Exposed at birth
- Fed by animal
- Brought up by humble foster parents in a rural or rustic setting
- Grow up fast – that is, we usually don't get a lot of stories about their childhood.
- Fight a [dragon]
- Rescue a [maiden]
- Use their own skills/abilities/intellect to become heroes
- Divine sponsorship
- Die young in fabulous circumstances

- Some seek immortality
- Doesn't always choose heroic journey, sometimes thrown into it, but
- Is always ready for journey when it occurs in taking on the challenge
- While heroes often fear death, they realize that a cowardly death is worse than mortality.

Think about particular heroes from stories you know – even contemporary, or close to contemporary – which fit some of these hero traits?

Heroic Life of Greek and Indo-European Archetypes

The fate of individuals marks clear boundaries for what they will be able to achieve. Much of what happens to characters in Greek stories is determined by fate, or more precisely, The Fates. No matter what a person tries to do, s/he cannot avoid the fate which has already been determined. Those who try will only meet with disaster, such as Oedipus.

In these cultural traditions, it is believed that man's efforts should not be spent exceeding proper limits of human condition, but living/bearing life with style, pride, dignity, and gaining fame through this. Think of the difference between someone who displays excess (say, Paris Hilton), and someone who lives within the "proper" limits (say, Mother Theresa). There's a difference in the way they gain their fame and the kind of life they live through that – as well as how they are/will be remembered.

If the hero is induced by Folly to commit excess (hubris) with regard to his fate (Moirai), he will be punished without fail by the divine vengeance personified as Nemesis.

Heroes and Society – Taking the Risk

Each of our heroes must set out to complete a task or meet some form of challenge – taking an outward journey and returning home. No hero is a hero without taking some form of risk.

- Heroes earn lasting fame - a mortal form of immortality.
- Heroes perform great deeds to benefit community.
- Heroes do inadvertently benefit self (becoming a "better person") which is a benefit to the community (to be a good person/citizen).
- Heroes provide a role model for the community, which helps to create more good citizens.

Hero myths examine the relationship between individual desire and responsibility to society.

Most commonly, heroes risk death to save society, a lose-win situation that results in a win-win.

For example, for a hero who dies in an effort to save others:

Hero dies = lose

Society is saved = win

The result:

Hero is immortalized in story = win

Society survives and continues = win

However...

If the hero plays it safe, both hero and society lose. A win-lose resulting in a lose-lose.

For example:

Hero lives = win

Society is not saved = lose

The result:

Hero is not immortalized, more likely is ostracized = lose

Society does not survive and cannot continue = lose

The hero must decide which to put first. If she puts herself first, then she is not truly a hero, or will lose hero status and must redeem herself.

Heroes are defined by how they relate to external circumstances – fame or vanity – the excesses of which will weaken the hero's character and role with society.

Greater heroes win against internal struggles: those who overcome psychological battles, or physical battles within the self in addition to external battles. We often see stories of heroes who have to overcome some fear to win, or who must fight their weakness (an addiction of some kind or low self-esteem) to win. Some heroes have physical challenges or disabilities they overcome or compensate for in order to win. These are the greater heroes. Can you think of any examples?

Basis of Heroic Poetry

Outstanding deeds of kings and warriors during the heroic age of a nation are a strong basis for the storytelling, which was told primarily to educate rather than record. Civilizations had to evolve to the point of having hero stories. Once the stories had been told of how the people came to be – and may well have included a god who behaved in a heroic fashion – it came time for the people to have their own human heroes. This is especially true among cultures at the time they began going out and exploring the world around them and encountering others.

Regular people are transformed into heroes in stories. Often, as cultures interacted and some shared stories, the same story would be told in a new culture, but the names of the heroes would change to reflect the characters already known in story in the culture, or to represent someone famous or in power in the culture.

Heroic deeds conform to mythological or ideological patterns (some archetypes/some specific to culture), either a pattern of known behavior, or behavior the culture valued and wanted to promote.

Hero myths reflect the history of the civilization – social, cultural, political, medical, economic, art, etc. When reading hero myths (or any myth for that matter), look for as many clues as possible that reveal what the culture valued at the time, what they knew about the world around them as well as themselves. Stories of battles that include how wounds were dressed tell a lot about what they knew of medicine at the time. Descriptions of warriors going into battle with decorated headgear and swords tell us something of the value of art. The clues are there for us to read and interpret.

Literary Qualities of Hero Myths

Narrative contrary exists in hero stories – heroes often have to face competing values – old vs. new; one culture vs. another; etc. These values clash and the hero has to make a decision, which reveals the evolution of a culture.

Poets of each generation develop stories. While they are handed down from generation to generation, each adds to or subtracts from the story to suit the value of the contemporary culture. Consider the difference between Batman and Rambo. As cultures change, so do their hero stories, although the archetype remains.

Each new storyteller (or bard or skald) creates new phrasing various meters. Consider it something akin to music, and how each generation develops its own influenced by what has come before. The same is true of the storytellers developing their own style of recitation, and changing some of the language and story around to fit their new form.

There would also be an elimination of redundancies, which was a common tool used in storytelling – like the refrain of a song. As new phrasing arose, old phrases were moved out.

If there were common scenes between stories/poems, the same language was used to describe it, such as preparing a meal or dressing for voyage. This provided some consistency between stories and gave the storyteller a standard they could use to simplify their job of remembering lines.

In epics, all the qualities are the same, just far more complex, more grand and with greater scope. Quite literally, epics are just much longer stories – like Beowulf or Gilgamesh.

Three Main Hero Story Types and Archetypes

Culture Hero – One that completes a task benefiting the survival and continuation of a particular culture, or promoting some aspect of technological progression. As a result of their acts, a society is allowed to survive and continue. Many cultures have heroes who steal or somehow bring fire to the people.

Traditional Hero – These are acts/heroes that complete tasks which display their skills and abilities. Traditional hero stories could easily be transferred from one culture to another because the actions of the story are fairly generic.

Trickster Hero – Tricksters are those characters and actions which are used to fool or trick other characters in the story, including gods. Tricksters sometimes behave very badly for negative reason. Some tricksters are continually up to no good, and it is surprising, though not unheard of, when they behave with kindness in a myth. In some cultures, tricksters achieve positive gains for their culture through their trickery, so you might say the ends justifies the means.

Fertility Hero – Most often also considered a culture hero, this is a hero or sequence of actions which saves the fertility of a culture, allowing the society to continue and flourish.

Epic Hero – This is any tale of great proportions in which the hero meets with many tasks. The story may well encompass years, even decades of time in the life of the hero.

These classifications are not mutually exclusive. A traditional hero can also be an epic hero, a culture hero may also have traditional qualities. But, generally, each story will have a main focus of one of these categories.